THE TALE OF "THE COPPERHEAD"


LIONEL BARRYMORE and DORIS RANKIN in "THE COPPERHEAD"

By AUGUSTUS THOMAS.

MY earliest recollections blend with incidents of the civil war. Among them are my mother trying to hide her tears as my father goes down the front stairs to the orderly who holds the second horse with the brass bound saddle almost as deep as the baby's cradle; and summer nights, as, kneeling, my mother holds me in her arms by the open window while we both listen to an awesome and rhythmic beat somewhere in the distance which she tells me is "the troops" and explains how their feet all striking the ground at the same time make that sound.

It was the heart throbs of a bleeding nation.

I remember the bitterness in the Missouri Legislature, where I was a page boy some years later, when a crash would occur between a Republican and a Democrat suspected of having been a Copperhead. As a page boy in Washington in 1870 I noted the distrust and sometimes the odium that attached itself to the conduct of the handsome and distinguished looking but sinister Fernando Wood, and I picked up the frequent whisper of Copperhead. As a youth I saw elections in Missouri where the cry of Copperhead produced cleavages and alignments as metallic as the name itself; and quite as late as the Presidency of Grover Cleveland Copperhead was an epithet as scarifying as that of convict.

When I read Mr. Landis's book "The Glory of His Country" I found no exaggeration in the sustained hatred for the central figure who was supposed to have been a Copperhead and I understand the reported feeling that had burned unabated for nearly forty years. I remembered Gen. Grant's prediction that such would be the condition and his statement to the effect that no man's political career had survived his opposition to a popular war. All those facts and their parallels in the present situation made me believe that not only might a play be written that would have popular appeal but that a patriotic service might be thereby rendered. I speak of a patriotic service because to most men writing now this terrible war has thrown them quite out of adjustment with their usual work, and it is possible to have real enthusiasm only when some part of the work that one does undertake lends itself toward helping in some way to the victory for which we all hope.

No man is such a prisoner as one who is caught up and held bound by an idea, and when the idea is a wrong one it takes often a pretty rude shock to shake him out of it. Many of the Copperheads of 1861 were sincere. Many of our present Copperheads are sincere, and the fact that they are in the minority means little to them when they think they are right. But if by a parallel borne out by history they can be shocked into a consciousness of the unholy quality of the thing they are doing it is possible that they may be silenced, if not reformed. Mr. Landis's book had the double value of addressing the present situation by resemblance and not by direct accusation. Much of the value of Æsop's and La Fontaine's fables is that, like ready made clothing, they may be adjusted to any wearer that they come near fitting without humiliating him by measuring him for the garment. And I rather felt that a war play of 1861 would be better patriotic propaganda than a war play with our soldiers of the present day, which would look more like a bit of newspaper reporting than it would like a drama.

I am reluctant to write of the play and not at the same time to express my appreciation of Mr. Barrymore's wonderful performance. Better even than the prompter, I know each line that he is going to speak, yet there are long stretches in his performance when it seems to me a reality rather than an assumption, and I have been gratified to find that the opinion of all with whom I have talked who have seen it.

"The Copperhead" is divided into two epochs. The first is in the spring of 1861, just after the President has called for 75,000 volunteers. The men of the little village have all responded to the call—all except Milt Shanks. The women are busy making uniforms for the soldiers, moulding bullets, &c. Grandma Perley, aged 74, who has lost relatives in every war the United States has engaged in up to that time, encounters Shanks's son Joey, who has been drilling with the volunteers moulding bullets. As he is only 16 his mother has not given her consent to his enlisting.

Grandma—Is that you, Joey?

Joey—Yes'm.

Grandma—Where's your ma?

Joey—Sewing—inside.

Grandma—You seem cross about sumpin'?

Joey—I want to be drillin' and they detailed me doin' this.

Grandma—Drillin'?

Joey—Yes.

Grandma—"Detailed" ye? Have you volunteered?

Joey—You bet I've volunteered.

Grandma (in approval)—Well, then you go drill—I'll do that for you.

Joey—Maybe you wouldn't know how, Mrs. Perley.

Grandma—Yes, I would.

Joey (explaining)—This is hot lead. A drop of it'll burn right thro' yer shoe before you kin kick it off.

Grandma—I know.

Joey—You pour it in these holes with this iron spoon.

Grandma—Lord, boy, don't teach yer gran'mother how to suck aigs! I moulded bullets fer Andrew Jackson. Where's your knife to trim 'em?

Joey—This is it.

Grandma—All right. Run along and drill.

Joey (with sample)—But these ain't exactly bullets. They're minnie balls. That ring round 'em is to fasten the paper cattridge on to. Here's one with the cattridge on it.

Grandma—I know all about it. And the ring holds mutton taller that turns into verdy grease—an' you can't volunteer unless ye got front teeth ter tear the cottridge paper to let the powder out when you ram the cottridge home.

Joey—That's right, Grandma.

Grandma—In 1812 every man had a powder horn. This idear of the powder fastened right on the bullet is twice as quick.

Joey—And the sharp nose on the bullet makes 'em go further.

Grandma—Let a Yankee alone fer inventions. Go on and drill, my boy!

Joey—Thank you, Grandma.

(Enter Ma [Mrs. Shanks]—She is a beautiful, dark haired drudge. She carries a coat).

Ma—Where are goin', Joey?

Joey—Ter drill.

Ma—I want you.

Joey (going)—They ain't time, Ma, now—honest, they ain't! (Exit.)

Grandma—Let him alone, Mrs. Shanks. I told him I'd spell him at these moulds. It's women's work, anyhow, at war times.

Ma—You're spoilin' him.

Grandma—A boy 'at wants ter volunteer has a right ter be spoiled some!

ACT III.

The second epoch of "The Copperhead" is laid in the early '90s. Shanks has suffered forty years of ostracism from the neighbors. His only human tie is with his granddaughter, Madeline King, the daughter of the little Elsie of the first epoch. Madeline, now in her twenties, has been away from her grandfather since she was 12 years old, in Boston, her school terms being financed there by a Mrs. Manning, who had come to the little middle Western village, now grown to a considerable sized town, from Boston. Mrs. Manning has a son, Philip, a little older than Madeline. The young people are in love with each other. Philip has gone into the Legislature, largely on the advice of old Shanks, who sees in the young lawyer a resemblance to the dead young soldier Joey. Madeline does not know all the unsavory character of her grandfather's reputation with his neighbors. Madeline for the past year or two has been following the career of singer ina Chicago church. She is now a candidate for a teacher's place in the local schools. Philip's mother is in charge of the campaign to place her in the school board's service. Newt Gillespie has continued the most inveterate and bitter of Shanks's enemies. Gillespie's daughter is Madeline's competitor for the school teacher's place. Shanks meantime has been working for the release of Lem Tollard from Joliet penitentiary, where the latter has been incarcerated since the affair of the murder of members of the Sheriff's posse in Kentucky. Philip and a Dr. Randall of Chicago, who has been Madeline's physician, had aided him, and their efforts have just brought success. Dr. Randall has come to see Shanks about Tollard's release. Meantime Philip has won Madeline's consent to marry him, anticipating the doctor, also a suitor, by about ten minutes. Shanks arrives from the village just on the heels of the doctor's discomfiture.

Shanks—Sit down, doctor. How do you think Madeline's looking?

Randall—Looking? Why, heartbreakingly happy, sir.

Shanks—Heart breaking?

Madeline—He's laughing at me, grandpa, because I've been foolish enough to tell him a secret, but I'll not let him laugh at you too; I'm engaged, grandpa.

Shanks (unhappy at the idea that the man is Randall)—Why——


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Madeline—To Philip Manning.

Shanks—To Philip—well, I'm happy too. That—(to Randall) that'll keep her here—(to Madeline) unless you go to Washington. (To Randall). The young man's in the Legislature. Fact you've heard him talk to your commission.

Randall (nodding)—I met him here to-day.

Shanks — Engaged! So you don't care anything about the teacher's position then?

Madeline—Oh, but I do—all the more—I've got to be perfectly independent—so that Philip shan't feel too sure about it. (All laugh.)

Shanks—I reckon you've seen her more'n her grandfather has—livin' in Chicago.

Randall—It must be lonely by yourself — what do you do here, Mr. Shanks, when she's away?

Shanks—Well—I read—an' I think considerable—an' I cook some—for myself—besides a good deal of it's habit.

Randall — Yes, these machines of ours are very adjustable things.

Shanks—Machines?

Randall—Our bodies.

Shanks—Yes, but I calculate it's more a man's ideas—how he thinks. Automobiles go long that road now, but I've seen cavalry ridin' by in the '60s, an' cannons, four hosses to 'em—Gen. Logan—"Fightin' John" they called him—rested hisself in that chair yer sittin' in. Madeline's grandmother give him a drink o' water.

Randall—Madeline' grandmother?

Shanks—My wife—dead now. An' when nothin's goin' by I kin see John Logan an' his calvary plainer than I see the automobiles—how do you 'count for that?

Randall—Deeper impressions.

Shanks—Madeline's mother played roun' under them lilac bushes—Madeline played under 'em—somehow I see the mother clearest—an' along in May, when the smell of 'em comes in the winder—'bout sundown—why I can't say it makes me downhearted 'xactly—but if I was a woman, by thunder, I'd jes' cry—I reckon. (Smiles.)

Madeline—Dear Granpa, I won't leave you alone so much any more.

Shanks — Nonsense! Why she's spent years in Boston preparin' herself. (To Madeline.) Don't you fret about me.

Randall—You say Logan sat in this chair?

Shanks—Yes, Fightin' John.

Randall—Was your son with Logan?

Shanks—With Grant.

Randall—Killed at Vicksburg.

Shanks—You heared of Joey?

Madeline—Yes, grandpa.

Shanks—Oh, yes. Vicksburg.

Randall—A hard siege, I believe.

Shanks—Grant didn't push it.

Randall—Didn't he?

Shanks—No.

Randall—Tell me about it.

Shanks—It's all as fresh as yesterday. You see, the' country'd been waiting fur Grant ter do sumpin'. (As the glint of madness comes in Shanks's eyes Madeline puts her hands together in distress. Randall gestures silence.)

Randall—Waiting for Grant.

Shanks—Yes. So I went down there myself. I sez to him, "What's the delay, General?" I recollec' he was settin' on a camp stool smokin', and——

Madeline (goes to him)—Granpa.

Shanks (feeling her touch)—Yes, dear.

Madeline—You were here when they brought Uncle Joey's body home, weren't you? Here with gramma.

Shanks—Yes, here.

Madeline—Then you couldn't have been at Vicksburg, could you? (Brushes his hair back.)

Madeline — That's just the dream again, Granpa—the dream.

Shanks (pause—to Randall) — Ever have a dream that way? Takes hold o' you perfect—till sumpin' brings you out of it.

Randall—I know about them, a little. Yes.

Shanks—It's all right, dearie. Excuse me. I'll be all right in a minute. (Goes up to fence.)

Madeline—I had to interrupt him—it hurts me so when that delusion comes over him.

Randall—Ever violent with it?

Madeline—Never—excited a little in telling it—I used to believe him when I was a child. Take a walk with me? (Shanks returns.)

Randall—Yes—if you wish it.

Madeline—I'll get a hat.

Shanks—And yer letter, Doctor—kind o' excited me some—brought back old times.

Randall—Made you happy I hope.

Shanks—I can't tell you how much. The pore feller's been in there thirty-eight long years—and night and day I've thought about him—been workin' on his case thirty years—fifteen different Legislatures.

Randall—Still, his first sentence was death.

Shanks—War times, Doctor — and war time hate. If he'd just had on a different suit of clothes when we got inter that fight—he'd been a prisoner o' war and set free in two years—jist as Philip Manning said ter yer board.

Randall—Does Tollard find any of his old friends living?

Shanks—He ain't been here to my knowledge.

Randall—Haan't?

Shanks—Your letter was the first hint I had he was free.

Randall—It must have startled you.

Shanks—Don't tell her.

Randall—I won't.

Shanks—She knows the folks here have been against me purty hard—but I've kept all that prison talk and—sentence o' death business out her life—and I'm gonna see Tollard first an' tell him not ter talk 'cause if he ain't got any place else ter go, I plan ter take him in here—yes, sir.

Randall (gives hand) — You're a Christian gentleman, Mr. Shanks.

Shanks (shakes hand)—Some backslidin'—I used horrible language durin' the war. (Enter Gillespie in Grand Army uniform.)

Gillespie—Shanks.

Shanks—Well, Newt—

Gillespie—Busy?

Shanks—I've got a friend visitin' here. (Enter Madeline.)

Madeline—I'm going to walk up and meet Mrs. Manning, Granpa.

Gillespie—That's her—ain't it?

Shanks—Madeline, this is Mr. Newt Gillespie.

Madeline—How do you do, sir?

Gillespie—Elsie's daughter?

Shanks—Yes.

Gillespie — I knowed yer grandmother, young woman.

Madeline—I never saw her.

Gillespie—Well, anybody 'at ever did would a knowed she was your grandmother. Don't lemme keep you—because us men have some business.

Madeline—We'll go then—come doctor. (Doctor opens gate, exits with Madeline.)

Gillespie—I don't call on you very of'en, Milt.

Shanks—No.

Gillespie—But I ain't like Hardy—I ain't tongue tied.

ACT IV.

Shanks, fearful for Madeline's happiness, resolves to tell the truth about his real sympathies and loyalty during the war. Madeline has broken her engagement to Philip. But he will not agree. The scene is the sitting room of Shanks's humble and rather grim home. Old Shanks has assembled Captain now Col. Hardy, Gillespie, Mrs. Manning, Philip and Dr. Randall and begins his justification:

Mrs. Manning—I've just got to be straightforward with you, Mr. Shanks.

Shanks—Best way—allers—if ye kin—straightforward!

Mrs. Manning—Were you ever—convicted on a criminal charge?

Shanks—Once.

Mrs. Manning—That man said the penitentiary.

Gillespie—And I said so too.

Mrs. Manning—I hate to add a moment to your unhappiness, Mrs. Shanks. I'm perfectly willing to concede that there was some mistake about it—that you were probably innocent of the charge, but—

Shanks—No, I took 'em—me and some other fellers workin' for the South. Them was war times, recollec', an' they wanted the horses fur John Mosby in Kentucky. 'f I'd been in the army it'd been all right, but I was—I wasn't in the army. So—

Mrs. Manning—You must believe I haven't meant to hurt you, Mr. Shanks.

Shanks—Course. Yer jist thinkin' about yer boy.

Mrs. Manning—That's all.

Philip—Never mind about me.

Shanks—That's all 'at matters now. I don't care about myself. Two other fellers was convicted 'long with me. One of 'em's gone now; you saw the other one to-day, so I don't have to say anything for them. But I would—Folks called 'em "copperheads," but they thought they was workin' fur their country, same as folks on the other side. Grant understood. He gave every feller his side arms and his hoss at Appomatax. Grant said: "You'll need the horses, boys, to plant yer crops." That's what Abe Lincoln would o' said too. Er—Sorry, Philip—awful sorry.

Philip — Over fifty years ago, Mr. Shanks. It's a damned shame to dig it up now. There's a moral statute of limitations and I hope that in fifty years I'll have as clean a heart.

Shanks—He—he used to put his hands on my shoulders too. I wish Hardy'd come—but there's something we kin do while we're waiting. (Has gone to desk—gets old revolver in paper, unwraps it. There is a tag on it.)

Mrs. Manning—Is that loaded?

Shanks—Four barrels—yes.

Gillespie—I didn't bring any gun.

Shanks—You kin have this one, Newt. (To Madeline.) Dearie, git the corkscrew for me. (Madeline goes for old folding corkscrew in buffet.)

Philip—Mrs. Shanks.

Shanks—At my trial this was marked exhibit B. Two barrels fired. The rest are just as we left 'em. Take that corkscrew, Philip, and pull out the wads and the powder, 'cause they never was any bullets in 'em. I didn't say that at the trial, 'cause I—didn't want to lay the blame all on the others—but I ain't a murderer, Madeline.

Madeline—Of course you aren't, dear.

Gillespie — You've hed thirty-eight years ter git out the bullets yerself.

Shanks—That's so—and I only want to convince Madeline about that. I've never told her a story.

Philip—I believe you, too.

Gillespie — Well, I don't—and it's time for your school board meetin', Mrs. Manning. (Enter Hardy.)

Shanks—Come in, Col. Hardy, come in, sir. Sit down, Mrs. Manning. A short horse is soon curried, and my business won't keep the men standin' long. Sit down, Maddy, dear—you kin stan' by her, Philip. (Pause as group arranges itself.) Doctor Randall, Philip, Col. Hardy and me was boys together. Our Congressman give me an appointment to West Point, but Tom Hardy ought o' had it. Besides, 'twasn't convenient fur me to go to West Point jest then, so I resigned it fur him. 'Fore that, we went together to a school where Abe Lincoln come and talked to us. We both knowed him from that time until he was elected President—ain't that so, Col. Hardy?

Hardy—Yes.

Shanks (gets Lincoln mask from mantel, blows dust from it)—Lincoln! We was together at his house 'fore he started for Washington. A sculpture man was there to take a plaster paris model of his face. Most folks think this is a after death thing, but Col. Hardy and me saw it took—jes' throwed the soft plaster on his face and let it get hard. Lincoln was sittin' in a armchair like you are. (To Mrs. Manning.) In this box—(gets it from desk)—where I have my letters and keepsakes is a model of Lincoln's hand—the hand that wrote the emancipation of slavery. (Pause.) The sculpture man sent me these hisself, so they're genuine. That stick's a piece of broomhandle Lincoln sawed off while Volk—(reads name on cast)—that was the sculpture feller's name—while Volk was mixin' plaster in a washbowl. (Shows hand by his own.) Bigger man 'n me every way. (Pause.) All of the statues of Lincoln nowadays is copied from this—(pause)—so you see we knowed him. (Pause.) Then the war broke out. Hardy tuk a vow to support his country. I took one to destroy it. Hardy's company marched off—my Joey, only 16, along with 'em. His mother leant agin the fence an' the women fanned her—an', my God—he looked like a soldier! (Regards picture of Joey.) (To Philip.) You was probably thinner at 16 yerself.

Philip—Yes, I was.

Shanks—I was peekin' from some bushes—cud o' almost teched him as they marched by—(pause)—blue eyes—(To Mrs. Manning. Pause.)—His mother never said a word—cried quite a spell. Well, us Knights o' the Golden Circle——

Gillespie—Copperheads——

Shanks (pause)—Golden Circle—we sent help to the South—all we could—and we pizened cattle; and I went to Richmond — Virginny — twict. Time went on, an' Vicksburg come, and one night a feller came into town on a box car and come up to our gate.

"When'd you hear from Joe?" sez he.

"Last week," I sez.

"How was he?" sez he.

"All right," I sez, and he sez: "Joe's dead." (Pause. To Madeline)—I kin see yer grama yet, a cryin' by the well, pettin' the corner of it where Joey'd been. Bym' by I leant over to tech her, but she drawed away a-tremblin' and a-sayin': "For Gawd's sake, Milt Shanks, yer unclean!" (Pause. To Mrs. Manning, his mother—(pause)—two or three days she was pinin'—with her face again the letters he'd wrote home, and then (pause)—an' the two—her and Joey—was buried at the same time. (Pause)—At the church—instead of the trouble I expected from the neighbors, they was all strange like an' kind, 'cept when I went to look at the pine coffin, underneath the flag where Joey was. Newt Gillespie took me by the arm and said (pause): You tell 'em, Newt, what you said to me.

Gillespie—I hev told 'em—more'n once.

Shanks—Tell her. She never heard it.

Gillespie—I'd give my word 'fore he died.

Shanks (to Madeline)—His word to Joey.

Gillespie—Yes. He said: "If you take me back don't let *him* see me. If he only *fought* on the other side I'd bin *proud*, even if he'd been the one that shot me—but no copperhead." An' I did. Right in the church I jes' tuk him by the arm and said: "It was his particular last request"—quiet like as I'm talkin' now, and led him out o' the church. An', by God, I'd do it again!

Madeline—Oh, grandpa!

Shanks—That left only little Elsie, yer ma—an' she was so little I couldn't leave her alone, and I was carryin' her on my arm. Newt Gillespie was the only man 'at spoke to me—and in the whole United States—yes, in the whole world—only one man wrote to me. (Pause.) I kep' his letter—natural—(gets letter from box)—I'm gonta ask Col. Hardy ter read it. (Takes letter from old flag and hands it open to Hardy.) Careful, Colonel. It's a keepsake with me. An' then that's all I've got to say. If 'twasn't for Madeline and Philip—and I know they're lovin' each other and separatin'——

Hardy—My God! Who's crazy—you or I—Milt Shanks! Milt Shanks!

Randall—What is it, Colonel.

Shanks—Read it, Col. Hardy.

Hardy (reads)—

"Executive Mansion,
"Washington, April 11, 1865.

"*Mr. Milton Shanks, Millville:*

"Dear Milt: Lee's surrender ends it all. I cannot think of you without a sense of guilt, but it had to be. I alone know what you did, and, even more, what you endured. I cannot reward you—man cannot reward anything worth while—there is only *One* who can.

"I send you a flag handkerchief. (Shanks unconsciously touches the flag.) It is not new, but you will prize it the more for that. I hope to shake your hand some time.

"Your friend,
"A. Lincoln."

Shanks—Colonel, do you recollec' the time you druv me to the train in March o' '61?

Hardy—Very well. You went to look at cattle.

Shanks—That's what I told you. I wuz called to Washington by Lincoln, an' two days later, at night, in his library — White House — he walked over to'erd a winder, and, without turning round he says: "Milt——" (Pause.) Funny I remember a clock tickin' on the mantelpiece— (Pause.) I sez: "Mr. President——" (Pause.) "Milt, how much do you love your country?" (Pause.) "I cahilate I'd die fur it," I sez. (Shades head.) "Thousands o' boys is a-cryin' to do that." Then he turned round. "Would you give up sumpin' more'n life?" (Pause.) "Try me," I sez. The President run his hands thru his hair an' went on: "It means to be odious in the eyes of men and women—ter eat yer heart out—alone—fer you can't tell yer wife—ner chile—ner friend." (Pause.) "Go on," I sez. (Pause.) "The Southern sympathizers are organizing in our State — really worse than the soldiers. I want you ter jine them Knights o' the Golden Circle—ter be one of them—a copperhead! their leader, if you kin. I need you, Milt. Yer country needs you." (Pause.) Hadn't been two minutes since he was laffin', but he lifted his hands, and it seemed we wuz the only folks in the world — (pause) and that clock — (pause) funny I remember that. (Pause.) "I'll do it," I sez. (Pause.) He tuk a little flag out o' his pocket—like as not this very one—and put it on the table like I'm puttin' it. (Pause.) "As Chief Magistrate of the nation I muster you inter the nation's service," he said. He laid my hand where the blue is and all the stars, and put his hand over mine. Only open, of course—(Uses his own hand) and said nuthin'— (pause) jes' look in my eyes—an' looked— (pause. Nods.) Well I jined them. (Pause.) It was terrible, when I couldn't tell the boy— (Looks at Philip) when he marched off. (To Mrs. Manning)—Sixteen, you know—blue eyes— (Pause. Madeline takes his hand and kisses it)—It ruined the Governor that pardoned me out o' Joliet, where I was convicted to, but I've allers figured he had his orders from Washington—same as me—an' couldn't talk about it. An' even when Vicksburg come and Joey was dead, why, the war wasn't over.


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DORIS RANKIN in "THE COPPERHEAD"

Hardy—But, damn it, in all these years we've despised you, why haven't you told?

Shanks—Told who? Couldn't tell Joey or his mother, and, with them gone—everything else seemed so—so useless. Only now, when it's seperatin' her an' Philip an' spoilin' her election—in the School Board——

Hardy—Her election! Why, damn it, that story'd elect a wooden Indian! (Gillespie grabs Shanks's coat.)

Randall—What are you doing?

Gillespie—Take that off. This coat don't belong on me.

Shanks—Newt—not yer Grand Army coat!

Gillespie—Git in it. Git in it. You ought to have worn it more than forty years. Here's the hat. (Goes to door, carrying Shanks's coat.) Bring him to that meetin'. I'm a damn fool, but, by God, I ain't no skunk! (Exit.)

Madeline—Oh, Grandpa!

Shanks (loving the coat)—The blue—Madeline, the blue!

Randall—The hat, Mr. Shanks!

Shanks—An' the cord round it. If they was only a lookin' glass.

Mrs. Manning—Come, Colonel.

(Hardy crosses to Shanks. The two men join hands in speechless emotion a moment.)

Shanks (forgiving)—Tom! (Hardy pats Shanks's shoulder and moves on with flag.) All right, now, to carry this, ain't it?

Philip—I should say it was!

Shanks—God! It's wonderful—to hev friends again!